CHAPTER TWELVE

Divinity and the Soul

For the rest of the holidays, Harry would not speak to Hermione.

He had owned the finest broomstick in the world for the space of one day. He had held it; he had felt it come alive in his hand. Now it was in a locked room somewhere in the castle with Madam Hooch and Professor Flitwick taking it to pieces, while he had no notion whether he would ever get it back, or what would be left of it when he did. There was nothing wrong with that broom. He knew it. But a broom stripped to the twig and put back together by a committee wasn't the same broom that had rolled out of the paper onto his bed; every day it stayed away was a day he spent on a school Shooting Star that pulled left.

That was the thing he couldn't say out loud without sounding like Wood. The match against Ravenclaw was coming. Harry was good; he knew he was good, it was the one plain fact about himself he had never doubted. Even so, nobody alive could win a Quidditch

match on a broom out of the school shed that took three seconds to turn, with the Cup riding on it.

Ron's view of the business was simpler.

'It's criminal damage,' he said, for the fourth time in two days, prodding the fire with a poker. 'If I fetched McGonagall to take Hermione's Arithmancy charts off her and cut them into squares, just in case, she'd have something to say about it, wouldn't she.'

'Leave it, Ron.'

'I'm only saying. A Firebolt. Stripped. Like it was a dodgy cauldron.'

Hermione wasn't there to answer for herself. She had stopped coming to the common room altogether, which saved everybody the trouble of deciding whether to speak to her; they assumed she had gone to earth in the library, where she had spent most of the term anyway. Ron went twice to fetch her out, and got nowhere. Harry told himself he was too angry to try. Underneath that, where he didn't look, sat something he recognised from a long way back: the knowledge that he was being unkind to somebody who had only been trying to keep him alive, and the sullen refusal to stop, because stopping would mean saying so.

So the pair of them were glad, in the end, when the rest of the school came back a few days after the New Year, and Gryffindor Tower filled up with noise again.

Wood came looking for Harry on the night before term started.

'Had a good Christmas?' he said, and he sat down without waiting to be told whether Harry had. He lowered his voice. 'I've been doing some thinking over Christmas, Harry. After the last match, you know. If the dementors come to the next one... I mean... we can't afford you to... well-'

He stopped, going red round the ears.

‘I’m working on it,’ said Harry quickly. ‘Professor Lupin said he’d train me to ward off the dementors. We should be starting this week. He said he’d have time after Christmas.’

‘Ah.’ The whole of Wood’s face let go at once. ‘Well, in that case. I really didn’t want to lose you as Seeker, Harry.’

It was said in the voice of a man ticking off an item of business, and it went into Harry like a nail. He’d been carrying something about since Christmas Day that he hadn’t put a name to, and Wood had just named it for him. He had lost the broom. Not Hermione, not McGonagall; him. Wood had three months of his last season left, had sworn at the rain four nights a week to get a team ready for it; his Seeker had gone and been given the best broom in Britain by somebody with no name, then handed it over to a teacher within six hours.

‘Oliver,’ he said. ‘About the broom. I’m sorry.’

Wood looked at him.

‘What are you being sorry for?’

‘It got taken off me. We’ve got the match with Ravenclaw in nine weeks, I’m flying a bloody Shooting Star, I’ve gone and-’

‘Harry.’ Wood had sat forward. ‘Stop that.’

‘I’m only saying that if we lose-’

‘If we lose, it’s because I picked the tactics, or because somebody dropped a pass, or because the weather turned. That’s how it works. You don’t get to carry the whole thing on your back, you’re thirteen.’ Wood scratched his jaw, looking as uncomfortable as a man can look while being kind. ‘Blimey. Who taught you to apologise for things that got done to you? Never mind. And have you ordered a new broom yet?’

‘No,’ said Harry.

‘What! You’d better get a move on, you know, you can’t ride that Shooting Star against Ravenclaw!’

‘He got a Firebolt for Christmas,’ said Ron, from the next chair.

Wood’s head came round.

‘A Firebolt? No! Seriously? A... a real Firebolt?’

‘Don’t get excited, Oliver,’ said Harry gloomily. ‘I haven’t got it anymore. It was confiscated.’

He told the whole story: the brown paper, the absent card, Hermione going to McGonagall, the jinx tests. Wood heard him out with his mouth slightly open.

‘Jinxed? How could it be jinxed?’

‘Sirius Black,’ Harry said wearily. ‘He’s supposed to be after me. So McGonagall reckons he might have sent it.’

Wood waved this away with one hand, as though the question of a mass murderer stalking his Seeker were a detail for another meeting.

‘But Black couldn’t have bought a Firebolt! He’s on the run! The whole country’s on the lookout for him! How could he just walk into Quality Quidditch Supplies and buy a broomstick?’

‘I know,’ said Harry, ‘but McGonagall still wants to strip it down-’

Wood went the colour of porridge.

‘I’ll go and talk to her, Harry,’ he promised. ‘I’ll make her see reason. A Firebolt. A real Firebolt, on our team. She wants Gryffindor to win as much as we do. I’ll make her see sense. A Firebolt...’

He got up, still saying it, then wandered off towards the boys’ staircase with his eyes fixed on the middle distance; Harry, watching him go, had a horrible feeling that what Wood was actually working

out, somewhere behind that square, honest face, was the floor plan of wherever the broom was being kept.

Lessons began again the next morning.

Nobody on earth wanted to spend two hours out on the grounds on a raw January morning, with the frost not off the grass by eleven. Hagrid had done his best, though, and his best, for once, was wonderful: he had built a bonfire in the paddock, with salamanders living in it. There were nine of them, bright orange, no longer than Harry's forearm, scampering up and down the white-hot logs with their tails in the flame, going through the fire itself as a dog goes through long grass. The class spent the whole lesson dragging dry wood out of the forest edge to keep the blaze up. It was the only warm thing anybody did all week.

'See, that's a proper lesson,' said Ron, red-faced, hauling an armful of brushwood. 'Nobody's lost an arm. Tell him, Harry, he'll be pleased.'

Divination was less of a success. Professor Trelawney had moved them on to palmistry, and she spent the first ten minutes with Harry's hand in both of hers, tilting it to the lamp, making small noises of distress.

'My dear boy,' she breathed at last. 'Your life line. I have never seen one so short. Never in all my years.'

'Right,' said Harry. 'Could you write that down for the Prophet? Only they've been running out of things to say about me.'

Lavender gasped. Parvati put a hand over her mouth. Professor Trelawney let go of Harry's hand as though it had bitten her, and Ron had to put his head under the table.

The lesson Harry wanted was Defence Against the Dark Arts, and he was out of his seat before the bell had finished.

‘Ah yes,’ said Lupin, when Harry reminded him of his promise. He was shutting the hinkypunk’s cloth over its tank, in no hurry at all. ‘Let me see. How about eight o’clock on Thursday evening? The History of Magic classroom should be large enough. I’ll sort it out with Professor McGonagall, then walk you back to your staircase afterwards; she has rules about you in corridors after dark, and she is quite right to have them.’ He picked up the briefcase. ‘I’ll have to think carefully about how we’re going to do this. We can’t bring a real dementor into the castle to practise on.’

‘Thursday,’ said Harry. ‘Right. Thanks, sir.’

‘Still looks ill, doesn’t he,’ said Ron, as the three of them went down the corridor towards dinner. ‘What d’you reckon’s the matter with him?’

There was a loud, impatient noise from behind them, a sort of *tuh*, the noise of somebody who has decided not to say something and then said it anyway with their tongue.

It was Hermione. She was sitting on the floor at the feet of a suit of armour with her bag open on her knees, trying to make it shut over a quantity of books that no bag was ever going to hold.

‘And what are you tutting at us for?’ said Ron irritably.

‘Nothing,’ said Hermione, in a voice from several floors up, hauling the bag over her shoulder.

‘Yes, you were,’ said Ron. ‘I said I wonder what’s wrong with Lupin, and you-’

‘Well, isn’t it obvious?’ said Hermione, with a look of such maddening superiority that Harry felt his own temper go.

‘If you don’t want to tell us, don’t,’ snapped Ron.

‘Fine,’ said Hermione haughtily.

She marched off. The suit of armour creaked round on its plinth to watch her go, which Harry hadn’t known they could do.

‘She doesn’t know,’ said Ron, glaring after her. ‘She’s just trying to get us to talk to her again.’

Harry said nothing. He was thinking that Hermione had looked thin, and that her bag had been mended at the strap with what appeared to be a bootlace.

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The Weasleys closed in on Harry that same week, and they did it so clumsily that he worked it out inside three days.

It began with Ron, which Harry could have forgiven, because Ron wasn’t subtle at the best of times. They were up in the dormitory on the Tuesday night, and Harry had the curtain half drawn, going over the list in his head again, the thing he did now instead of sleeping: Black, the Order of Merlin, the finger in the box, the crossword, the twelve years that had cost a man nothing at all.

‘Here,’ said Ron, from the next bed. ‘Chess?’

‘It’s half eleven.’

‘So? You’re not asleep. You’ve not been asleep for about a fortnight, mate, I can hear you moving about and mumbling.’ A pause. The bed creaked as Ron turned over. ‘My dad’s got a rule. He says you can’t think straight about a thing at night that you couldn’t think straight about at four in the afternoon. He says the night adds about forty per cent.’

‘Forty per cent of what?’

‘Dunno. Whatever you’ve got. If you’ve got a cold at night it’s pneumonia by midnight.’ Another pause, longer. ‘If you’ve got somebody you want to kill, by midnight you’ve worked out how.’

Harry lay very still in the dark.

‘Go to sleep, Ron.’

‘Set the board up,’ said Ron. ‘I’ll let you have white.’

They played until nearly two. Harry lost four games in a row, badly, and didn't once think about Sirius Black while he was losing them. He understood perfectly well what had been done to him. He let it be done anyway.

Fred and George were worse at it than Ron.

On the Wednesday they appeared on either side of him at breakfast, one each side, like a pair of bookends.

'Harry,' said Fred. 'A word.'

'We're here,' said George, 'on a matter of business.'

'What business?'

'Your business,' said Fred. 'Specifically, the business of you going after a bloke who blew up a street.'

Harry put down his toast. 'Who told you that?'

'Nobody,' said George, with great dignity. 'We deduced it. By observation. You've got the face on.'

'What face?'

'The face Mum had the morning she came back from the Prewetts', the time Bill told us about,' said Fred. 'The one that means somebody's getting their house taken apart.' He leant in. 'Now listen. We're not here to lecture you. We're the last two people in this castle with any standing to lecture anybody. We're here with a professional offer.'

'A trade,' said George.

'You tell us when you're going,' said Fred, 'and we come with you.'

Harry stared at them.

'You what?'

'We come with you,' said Fred patiently. 'Two extra wands, one map you've already got, and the four of us know every way out of this school between us. You'd have a sporting chance. On your own,

with that broom in a cupboard and a Shooting Star in the shed, you'd be a smear on a wall by Tuesday.'

'And we'd be in dead trouble with Mum,' said George. 'Which should tell you how serious we are.'

'I'm not going anywhere,' said Harry.

'Course you're not,' said Fred, getting up.

'Nobody's suggesting you are,' said George, getting up on the other side.

'Only when you do,' said Fred, 'you'll tell us first. Because the alternative is you go alone, which is daft, and we're not having it.' He clapped Harry on the shoulder, hard, the way he did to Wood. 'Right. Kippers.'

They went off down the table. Harry sat with his cold toast and the distinct sensation of having been handled.

Then there was Percy, who tried to do it with a form.

He cornered Harry in the common room on the Thursday afternoon with a piece of parchment ruled into columns, explaining at length that he had taken the liberty of drawing up a timetable of Harry's week; that, having examined it, he had identified four separate periods in which Harry was unaccounted for; and that in his capacity as Head Boy he proposed to accompany Harry during three of them, the fourth being a bath.

'Percy,' said Harry.

'It is no trouble whatsoever.'

'Percy. Did your mum write to you about me?'

Percy's ears went the Weasley colour. He straightened the parchment on his knee with both hands, twice.

'Mother,' he said, with enormous care, 'has written to me on a number of topics this term.'

'Go on.'

‘She wrote,’ said Percy, ‘that you were likely to do something stupid in the next few months, that you have nobody at home to notice if you do, and that as there are five of us in this school it would be a poor show if the five of us between us could not manage to keep one small boy from getting himself killed.’ He cleared his throat. ‘She underlined parts of it. I shall not say which parts.’

Harry looked at the ruled columns for a while.

‘You’ve put Divination down twice.’

‘It feels like twice,’ said Percy.

And that was the whole of the Weasley conspiracy, laid out in front of him: Ron with a chessboard at midnight, the twins offering to commit treason at his convenience, Percy with a timetable, Ginny doing it the simplest way of all, by sitting at the end of the table where she could see him, going silent whenever Black’s name was said anywhere near her. Harry ought to have minded. Nobody had ever managed him before; nobody had ever thought him worth the paperwork. Instead he went up to the dormitory before dinner, shut the curtains, and sat on the end of his bed for a while with his hands over his face, because there had been a line in Percy’s recitation that had got under his guard: *you have nobody at home to notice if you do*.

Somebody in Devon had written it down. Somebody in Devon had counted up five children in one castle, had allocated them.

He thought about the jumper with the lion on it, folded in the bottom of his trunk. Which he adored almost as much as he adored Mrs Weasley herself.

Then he thought about Black. His jaw set, the warm feeling went out like a lamp in a draught, because none of it altered the one thing that mattered, which was that a man was walking about free in the snow somewhere who had sold Harry’s mother for nothing at all.

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At eight o'clock on Thursday evening Harry left the Tower for the History of Magic classroom.

It was dark when he got there, cold, and smelling of the chalk dust of a hundred years of Professor Binns. He lit the lamps along the walls with his wand, one after another, then waited. Five minutes later the door opened with a shove, because Professor Lupin had no hand free: he was carrying a packing case against his chest, a big one, roped at the corners. He got it onto Professor Binns's desk with a thump that raised dust.

'What's that?' said Harry.

'Another boggart.' Lupin shrugged off his cloak over the back of a chair. 'I've been combing the castle since Tuesday, and very luckily I found this one lurking inside Mr Filch's filing cabinet. It's the nearest thing we'll get to a real dementor. It will turn into one the moment it sees you, so we can practise on it. When we're not using him I'll keep him in my office; there's a cupboard under my desk he'll like.'

Harry looked at the case. Something inside it shifted, without sound, as water shifts.

'Okay,' he said, in a voice he was pleased with, because it suggested a boy who was merely glad of the equipment.

'So.' Lupin had his wand out. He nodded at Harry's. 'The spell I am going to try and teach you is highly advanced magic, Harry. Well beyond Ordinary Wizarding Level. It is called the Patronus Charm.'

'How does it work?' said Harry nervously.

'When it works correctly, it conjures up a Patronus,' said Lupin. 'A sort of anti-dementor. A guardian. It stands between you and the thing, like a shield.'

‘A shield made of what?’

‘Ah.’ Lupin seemed pleased by the question. ‘Of everything the dementor isn’t.’

‘That’s not an answer, sir.’

‘No,’ Lupin agreed, ‘it isn’t. Sit on the desk, this takes a minute.’ He put his own wand down on the blotter, which Harry noticed, because teachers didn’t usually put their wands down in front of a boggart. ‘The Patronus is old. Nobody can agree how old. There are versions of it carved into things a good deal older than the Statute, Harry, older than Hogwarts; there are versions of it that were being cast before anybody in these islands thought of putting the magic into a stick and pointing it. Wizards argue about who invented it. My own opinion is that nobody did. It was found.’

‘Found how?’

‘The way water is found. By somebody who was thirsty.’

Harry turned that over. Outside, something flew past the high window.

‘Is it dark magic?’ he said. ‘Only Snape says all the really old spells are.’

‘Professor Snape,’ said Lupin, with a very faint stress on the first word, ‘is correct that many old spells are dark magic. Most dark magic comes from a land long forgotten by Wizards. I can’t even tell you where most of it is from. Nor do I care to find out.. There is no dark version of the Patronus Charm. There cannot be. It isn’t that it’s forbidden.’ He picked his wand up again, turned it over once, set it down. ‘It is a spell of plain good, Harry, in a world where darkness holds sway over so much. Including magic. It does not hurt. It does not hold. It defies and destroys evil.’

Harry's mouth had gone dry. He asked the next question with his eyes on the desk, in the carefully flat voice he used at Privet Drive when he wanted something.

'Sir, when you say plain good. Good like... where does that come from, though? The good bit. Is it out of the wizard, or is it-' He stopped, and started again, more sideways. 'What I mean is, in the old books. The ones that are older than wands. What did they think it came from?'

Lupin didn't answer at once.

When Harry risked a glance, he found that the tiredness had gone out of the man's face, that something else had come into it, something awake, and that he was being looked at rather closely.

'They thought it came from outside,' said Lupin. 'All of them. Every account I have ever read, from every country, in every century, says the same thing in its own words: that the light in the charm is not entirely cast by the wizard. It is let through him. The oldest of them say it rather beautifully. They say it originally comes from divinity.'

'Divinity,' Harry repeated.

'Yes.'

'And the ones who wrote that. Were they...' Harry examined a knot in the desk. He wouldn't say God. It was silly. 'I only wondered what sort of people they were. The ones who wrote it down.'

'Monks,' said Lupin, 'who got up at five in the morning in cold buildings to say thank you to somebody they couldn't see. But believed in wholeheartedly, nonetheless. '

The lamps hissed. Harry kept his eyes on the knot in the desk. His heart was going hard, because he'd been fishing for ten minutes with a net full of holes and had just caught something.

‘Harry,’ said Lupin. ‘You may ask me the actual question if you like.’

‘I haven’t got an actual question.’

‘Very well.’ There was no mockery in it at all. ‘Then I shall answer one you haven’t asked, which teachers are entitled to do once a term. There is nothing silly about it.’ He let that sit. ‘Whatever it is. There is nothing silly about it. It will keep until you want to say it, and when you do I shan’t laugh. Now. Where were we.’

Harry found he had to look very hard at the lamp on the far wall.

‘A guardian,’ he said. ‘What does a Patronus look like?’

‘Each one is unique to the wizard who conjures it.’

‘And how do you conjure it?’

‘With an incantation, which will work only if you are concentrating, with all your might, on a single, very happy memory.’

Harry looked up.

‘A memory? Why a memory? There isn’t another spell like that. Nothing we’ve done needs you to remember anything, it’s wand movements, derived from Latin and Roman sorcerers, not blowing your eyebrows off.’

‘Quite right,’ said Lupin. ‘And it is the best question you have asked tonight. All magic comes from the soul. Most magic draws on what a wizard can do. A very small number of spells draw on what he is. Those are the dangerous ones, in both directions.’ He held up one hand, then the other, as though weighing something. ‘You cannot cast an Unforgivable Curse just by learning it. Everybody knows the words. Say them with your whole heart behind them, meaning them, wanting them, and the curse works; say them without, nothing happens at all, which is the single most merciful fact in our entire body of law. Dark magic of that order asks the caster for something

dark out of his soul, rips it out, then gives it back darker than ever. Staining the soul with each use.'

'And the Patronus asks for something too.'

'Indeed, Harry.' said Lupin. 'But from the goodness of our soul.' He stood up. He had begun, without seeming to notice, to walk up and down in front of the packing case. 'Hear me out, because this is the part that matters, then we shall do the practical and you may stop humouring me. The Patronus is one of the most righteous spells there is. It runs on light magic alone. On something derived from God, Harry, and from your own soul; the two have to meet in you, the meeting-place being a happy memory, which is why it's a happy memory, because that is the only thing most of us own that both of them have touched.' He turned at the window, turned back. 'Only a good man can cast it. A good soul. A soul with something in it worth guarding. And that is precisely, exactly, to the inch, the sort of thing that a foul-'

The word came out of him wrong.

It came out low, torn, from somewhere a long way under the waistcoat. The hair rose on Harry's arms, because he had heard that noise four times now, every time out of this man: on the train, in the dark, with a hooded thing at the door; in an office over a smoking goblet; twice in a classroom in November, once over the word *Garou* and once over a painted man with his fists at his sides.

'-that a foul, evil thing like a dementor,' Lupin went on, very levelly, 'and the darkness that first thought of making dementors, exists in order to find, to open, to empty.'

Harry sat quite still.

'Sir,' he said. 'What first thought of making them?'

'Finish your training,' said Lupin, 'and then ask me that.' He breathed out. The thing went out of his shoulders. 'Right. Your

memory. You'll want a good one. Not a nice one. A good one. Have you got something?'

Harry hunted.

Nothing from Privet Drive was any use; that was the first thing he established, and it took him no time at all, because the whole of Privet Drive fitted in a cupboard with a light bulb. He went further back, found nothing, then went further forward. There it was: the first time he had ever got on a broomstick, out on the lawn in his first September, with Madam Hooch gone off to the hospital wing with Neville, a glass ball glinting in Dracina Malfoy's fingers fifty feet up, the ground dropping away from him, that enormous swoop in the stomach, the discovery, in one second flat, of the only thing he had ever been good at.

'Yeah,' he said. 'I've got one.'

'Right.' Lupin cleared his throat. 'The incantation is this. *Expecto patronum*.'

'*Expecto patronum*,' Harry said under his breath. '*Expecto patronum*.'

'Concentrating hard on your happy memory?'

'Oh... yeah...' Harry shoved his mind back onto the broom, the lawn, the swoop. '*Expecto patrono*... no, *patronum*... sorry... *expecto patronum, expecto patronum*-'

Something came out of the end of his wand.

It wasn't much. It was a thin curl of silver, like the smoke off a blown-out match, hanging a foot in front of him before it went.

'Did you see that?' said Harry excitedly. 'Something happened!'

'Very good,' said Lupin, smiling. 'Right, then. Ready to try it on a dementor?'

'Yes,' said Harry.

He gripped his wand hard, walked out into the middle of the empty floor between the desks, and set his feet. He tried to hold the broom in his head: the lawn, the lift, the glass ball coming down out of the sky with his fingers closing round it. Something else kept pushing in at the edges of it. Any second now he might hear her again. He oughtn't to think that, because thinking it brought it, and he didn't want it.

Or did he.

That was the thought he didn't look at directly, standing on the cold flags with his wand up. It was the only time he ever heard her. Three times now, four, in a whole life; a woman's voice, young, breaking; the only proof he had ever had that his mother was a person who existed, rather than being a dream, a smiling shape behind a sheet of glass in an empty classroom that Dumbledore had taken away for his own good. Because Dumbledore was wise.

'Ready?' said Lupin, with his hand on the lid.

'Ready.'

Lupin pulled.

The dementor came up out of the case slowly, unfolding, taller than a man, its hood turning until the hole of it faced Harry; one grey glistening hand, scabbed over like something dragged out of water, came up to hold the rags of its cloak. The lamps round the walls dipped, guttered, went out together.

It stepped down onto the floor. It drew a breath, deep, rattling, pulling.

The cold came over Harry in a wave, up through the soles of his feet.

'*Expecto patronum*!' Harry yelled. '*Expecto patronum*! *Expecto*-'

And the doubt arrived.

It came in under the charm like water under a door, and it had been waiting all week for a chance. *Only a good man can cast it.* Harry stood with his wand up in the freezing dark and heard himself being asked a question he couldn't answer: what he was, exactly. Because a boy who had seen a man by a fallen pillar in the Chamber, in a plain white robe, looking at him with pride, and who had spent seven months deciding he had probably imagined it, out of embarrassment, out of the terror of being a fool, wasn't a boy who had agreed to anything. And a boy who had dreamt, two months ago, of standing in a kitchen with his wand on his aunt's eyes, with a pretty girl at his shoulder saying *good*, who had woken up ashamed of how much of it he had enjoyed, wasn't a good soul with something in it worth guarding. He was something else. He didn't have a name for it. He had read half of that thick paperback omnibus version of Lord of the Rings, in which a ranger with a broken sword and no kingdom had said, more or less, the same thing about himself in the dark; Harry, who hadn't got to the end of the book yet, had no way of knowing whether it came right.

The classroom dissolved.

He was going down through thick white fog, and her voice came up at him louder than it had ever been, no longer a scream but words, close, as though she were in the room.

'Not Harry! Not Harry! Please... I'll do anything-'

'Stand aside. Stand aside, girl!'

'*Harry!*'

He came back.

He was flat on his back on the flagstones with the lamps burning again, and Lupin was crouched over him. Harry knew exactly what had happened without needing to be told; his face was wet with cold sweat behind his glasses.

‘Sorry,’ he muttered, getting himself up on one elbow.

‘Are you all right?’ said Lupin.

‘Yes.’

Harry hauled himself up by a desk and leant on it.

‘Here.’ Lupin put a Chocolate Frog into his hand. ‘Eat that before we try again. I didn’t expect you to manage it the first time. In fact, had you managed it, I should have been astounded.’

‘It’s getting worse,’ Harry said, biting the head off the Frog. ‘I could hear her louder that time. And him. Voldemort-’

Lupin’s lips drew back off his teeth.

It was gone in half a second, and the growl that came with it was almost under hearing, but Harry had been close enough to feel it in the desk under his hand. The lamplight had done something briefly odd to the man’s eyes.

‘Sir-’

‘A moment.’ Lupin stood with his back half turned, breathing, the way Madam Pomfrey made you breathe. Then he faced round, and he was tired, patched, ordinary. ‘Forgive me. Certain names are... loud, to certain kinds of hearing. Harry, if you don’t want to continue, I will more than understand-’

‘I do!’ said Harry fiercely, stuffing the rest of the Frog into his mouth. ‘I’ve got to! What if the dementors turn up at our match against Ravenclaw? I can’t afford to fall off again. If we lose this game we’ve lost the Quidditch Cup!’

‘All right then.’ Lupin went back to the case. ‘You might want to select another memory. A happy memory, I mean, to concentrate on. That one doesn’t seem to have been strong enough.’

Harry thought. He thought of the Great Hall last June at half past three in the morning, the whole House on its feet in its dressing gowns, the House Cup to Gryffindor for the second year running,

Ron hammering him on the back, the noise coming off the walls. If that wasn't a happy memory then Harry didn't have one.

'Ready?' said Lupin, hand on the lid.

'Ready,' said Harry, cramming his head with scarlet.

'Go!'

The room went black and bitter. The dementor came gliding out, drawing that long breath, one rotten hand reaching.

'*Expecto patronum*!' Harry yelled. '*Expecto patronum*! *Expecto pat-*'

White fog. Big blurred shapes going across it. Then a new voice, a man's, close, fast, frightened, shouting over something falling.

'Lily, take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off-'

Feet. A door going over. A high, delighted laugh.

'Harry! Harry... wake up.'

Lupin was patting his face, quite hard. It took Harry a long moment to work out why he was lying on a dusty floor.

'I heard my dad,' he mumbled. 'That's the first time I've ever heard him. He tried to take on Voldemort himself, to give my mum time to run for it.'

He discovered that there were tears on his face, mixed into the sweat. He put his head down as far as it would go and dragged his sleeve across his eyes, making a business of his shoelace so that Lupin wouldn't see.

'You heard James?' said Lupin.

The voice was wrong. Harry got his face dry and looked up.

'Yeah,' he said. 'Why? You didn't know my dad, did you?'

'I... I did, as a matter of fact,' said Lupin. 'We were friends at Hogwarts.' He was looking at the packing case rather than at Harry. 'Listen, Harry. Perhaps we should leave it here for tonight. This

charm is ridiculously advanced. I shouldn't have suggested putting you through this.'

'No!' Harry was on his feet. 'I'll have one more go! I'm not thinking of happy enough things, that's what it is. Hang on.'

He went digging.

A really happy memory. One strong enough to hold its shape in that cold. Not the broom; not the Cup. Further back, before either, to a hut on a rock in the sea, rain going sideways, a vast man coming through a broken door with a squashed birthday cake, and the single sentence that had split Harry's life in two: *yer a wizard, Harry*. Not the magic. The leaving. The understanding, at eleven years old, standing in his cousin's cast-off pyjamas, that there existed a place that wasn't Privet Drive, that he was going to it, that they couldn't stop him.

He held on to that with both hands, got up, and faced the case.

'Ready?' said Lupin, who looked like a man proceeding against his own advice. 'Concentrating hard? All right. Go!'

The lid came off for the third time. The dementor rose. The room went cold and dark.

'*EXPECTO PATRONUM*!' Harry bellowed. '*EXPECTO PATRONUM*! *EXPECTO PATRONUM*!'

The screaming started again inside his head. This time it came and went, loud, then faint, then loud, like a wireless being tuned by somebody in another room; through it he could still see, which was new, he could still see the hooded thing in front of him, standing quite still.

Then something enormous and silver came out of the end of his wand.

It had no shape he could name. It hung in the air between him and the dementor like a lantern wrapped in a cloud. The cold went

back from it a yard, two yards. Harry's legs turned to water under him, and he stayed up.

'*Riddikulus*!' roared Lupin, springing past him.

There was a crack. The silver went out along with the hooded thing, and Harry sat down hard on a chair, shaking from the knees down, as winded as if he had run the length of the lake. Through the swimming edges of his vision he watched Lupin drive the boggart back into the packing case with his wand. It lost the hood on the way. For about half a second, going backwards over the lid, it was something else altogether: something tall, stooped, shaggy, filling the end of the room. Then the lid came down on it. Harry, who had both hands on the arms of the chair while he concentrated on not being sick, did not take it in at all.

'Excellent!' Lupin strode over. 'Excellent, Harry! That was definitely a start!'

'Can we have another go? Just one more go?'

'Not now,' said Lupin firmly. 'You've had enough for one night. Here.'

He put a slab of Honeydukes' best into Harry's hands, the size of a roof tile.

'Eat the lot, or Madam Pomfrey will be after my blood. Same time next week?'

'Okay,' said Harry.

He bit a corner off the chocolate and sat getting his breath while Lupin went round the walls putting out the lamps that had relit themselves. Something had been turning over in his head since the second attempt, and it got out before he had decided whether to let it.

'Professor Lupin?'

'Mm.'

'If you knew my dad, you must've known Sirius Black as well.'

Lupin turned round very fast.

‘What gives you that idea?’ he said sharply.

‘Nothing.’ Harry’s heart jumped. ‘I mean, I just knew they were friends at Hogwarts too.’

The sharpness went out of Lupin’s face as quickly as it had come.

‘Yes, I knew him,’ he said shortly. ‘Or I thought I did. You’d better be off, Harry, it’s getting late.’

Harry got his bag. He was at the door with his hand on the ring when Lupin spoke again, behind him, in a different voice altogether; and everything the man had said that evening about light, about agreeing, about people in cold buildings at five in the morning, had been so carefully sideways that Harry wasn’t ready for how straight this came.

‘Harry. Your mother Lily. She believed in Christ with all her heart. Even when all the witches and wizards tutted at her, snickered at her. Even when I, James, even... even Sirius never believed. Not then. Not me, then. She believed.’ A pause. ‘If nothing else. Please remember that.’

Harry stood with his hand on the door.

He had no idea what to do with it. It didn’t fit anywhere he could put it, not with the dungeon, not with the dreams, not with the man by the pillar he had spent seven months calling a trick of concussion; it simply sat there, enormous and quiet, like a parcel left on a doorstep. What he found himself saying wasn’t about any of that.

‘Sir. Could you tell me about them? My mum and dad.’ His voice came out thinner than he wanted. ‘Only I don’t actually know anything. I know what Hagrid’s told me, I’ve got photographs, and now I’ve got...’ He stopped. ‘I’ve got their voices. That’s it, and I only got that off a boggart in a box.’

Lupin stood for a moment with the last lamp unlit.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Of course I will. Not tonight.’ He put one hand flat on Professor Binns’s desk, and Harry noticed that he was leaning on it. ‘Forgive me. Tonight I am not quite... tonight I should be poor company. Next week. Ask me next week. I shall tell you about your father and the Whomping Willow, which is a story you will like, plus one or two about your mother which you had better not repeat.’

‘Right,’ said Harry. ‘Thanks. Goodnight, sir.’

He went out. The door shut behind him, and he didn’t hear what happened in the History of Magic classroom afterwards, which was a chair going over, then a man sitting down on the floor beside it with his back against Professor Binns’s desk, both hands over his face, breathing like something running.

Harry went along the corridor, round the corner, then, instead of going up, stepped in behind a suit of armour to sit down on its plinth in the dark with his chocolate.

He wished he hadn’t mentioned Black. That was plain enough; Lupin had turned round like a man touched on a burn. But under the wishing, the rest of the evening was settling on him, and he discovered that he felt scraped out, hollow, tired in a way that had nothing to do with the hour, for all that he was full of chocolate.

Because it had been terrible. Hearing it was terrible. He had lain on a classroom floor twice tonight while his mother was murdered over his head, and he was going back next Thursday to do it again. The reason, the real one, under the one about Quidditch, was that those two voices in the fog were the only time since he was fifteen months old that his parents had been in a room with him.

He couldn’t have both. He understood that quite clearly, sitting on a cold plinth with chocolate going soft in his hand. A proper Patronus, the sort that charged, the sort Dumbledore had thrown

across a flooded pitch, would mean never hearing them again. Every lesson he got better at the charm was a lesson nearer to shutting the door on the only thing he had.

'They're dead,' he told himself, out loud, in the dark, in a hard flat voice he had used on himself since he was six. 'They're dead, and listening to the echoes of them won't bring them back. You'd better get a grip on yourself if you want that Quidditch Cup.'

He got up, put the last of the chocolate in his mouth, then went back along the corridor to where Lupin was waiting at the foot of the stairs to see him up, as promised. Lupin left him at the Fat Lady's replacement without saying anything at all, which was the kindest available thing; and if Harry cried the last flight of it, there was nobody on the stairs at that hour to see him do it, which was how he preferred to arrange matters.

*

Ravenclaw played Slytherin a week after the start of term, and Slytherin won.

It was narrow. It was, by the account of everybody who wasn't in Slytherin, extremely narrow; Ravenclaw had led for an hour, and the Snitch had gone to the Slytherin Seeker off the tip of her fingers at the Ravenclaw end with about four inches to spare. The four inches didn't appear in any version of the story told afterwards by the Slytherin Seeker herself.

'It was never in doubt,' said Dracina Malfoy, in the Entrance Hall, to a crowd of third-years who hadn't asked. 'I had her from the moment we came out of the north turn. One keeps a little in reserve, you see, so that one may put it away cleanly in front of the posts, rather than flailing about like a Gryffindor in a hurricane.'

She said it over her shoulder. Harry was eleven feet behind her, carrying a bag of books, and the whole thing had been arranged in the air so that he would be exactly there to hear it.

He knew it, too. He knew the entire performance by now: the chin, the carrying voice, the pause before the word *Gryffindor*. What he found insupportable was that it worked.

He had spent all week intending to avoid her.

He had reasons, good ones, carried about since Christmas like a stone in a shoe: there was a letter with a Ministry seal on Hagrid's table with *the official complaint lodged by Mr Lucius Malfoy* in the middle of it; there was also a girl who had sat at his elbow in a dungeon in September with ink on her left hand, telling him she hadn't sent a thing. Only one of those could be true, so far as Harry could see. He was thirteen; he wasn't a fool; he could do that sum.

So he had decided to have nothing more to do with her. He had kept the decision for three days. Then she had come down the marble staircase on the Tuesday with her hair out of its plaits, had seen him, had changed course across the whole width of the Entrance Hall to walk beside him as far as the dungeons, saying nothing of any consequence whatever: the weather, the ice on the lake, the uselessness of the Slytherin Beaters. Harry had walked the whole way with her without once bringing it up.

That was what frightened him, afterwards, lying in the dark.

Because he could feel, quite distinctly, that there were two of him fighting within himself, and they weren't the same size any more. One of them was the boy with the letter in his head, who had been lied to, who had opened a door he kept bolted only to have it shut on his fingers, who wanted, in a cold way, to walk up to her at the Slytherin table, in front of Flint, Pansy, all of them, to ask exactly how many pages it had run to. The other one was newer, worse, and

didn't argue. It didn't care about the letter. It had been in the kitchen at Privet Drive in a dream in November with her warmth all down his side, her voice at his shoulder saying *good*, saying *that one, Harry, that one especially*; it had woken up ashamed, then gone to sleep hoping; it was the one in charge of his feet whenever she crossed a hall towards him. It wanted her close. It wanted, in a way he had no words for and no intention of finding any, the thing that had happened in the dream when she turned her face up.

And under both of them, feeding both, was the thought he couldn't get rid of: that of every person in this castle, she was the only one who had ever looked straight at what had been done to him without flinching, without pitying him, without telling him to be better than it. *I'm not being kind, I'm being accurate.* Ron would hold his shoulder while he broke; Hermione would put her arms round him. Neither of them would ever say *good*.

If she had lied about Buckbeak, then she had lied about all of it, and that left nobody.

So he didn't ask.

He meant to. Four times in seven weeks he got right up to the edge of it, and four times something happened; if Harry had been in the habit of standing back to look at the shape of his own life, he might have noticed that the things which happened were all, in their way, about the same subject.

The first time was on the Friday after the Slytherin match, out by the lake.

The lake had frozen hard in the second week of January, right out to the middle, grey-white and creaking. Half the school had been down to stand on the edge of it. Harry had come out after Charms with the vague intention of walking by himself. He found Dracina Malfoy there already, alone for once, standing at the margin where

the frozen reeds came through, throwing small stones so that they went skittering away over the ice, singing.

'Potter,' she said, without turning round. 'Listen to it. Have you heard that before?'

'No.'

'It's the best noise in Britain.' She threw another. It went off across the ice with a long rising whine. 'Father had the lake at the Manor frozen for me when I was eight, out of a book, and it didn't do this. One can't buy it, apparently.'

Harry stood beside her to throw a stone of his own, which did it too; for about four minutes the pair of them said nothing at all, which was, he realised later, the longest he had ever been comfortable in anybody's company.

'Dracina,' he said. 'Can I ask you about something.'

'You may ask me about anything.' She didn't look away from the ice. 'I shall decide afterwards whether to have heard it.'

'It's about Hagrid's hippogriff. There's a letter-'

A shout went up from fifty yards off.

Harry turned. A knot of Hufflepuffs had gathered where the bank shelved, and a thin second-year boy had got out onto the ice: properly out, past the reeds, twenty feet from land, with his arms straight out from his sides. His friends were roaring at him. He was laughing, white-faced with it, taking another step, then another, and the thing that struck Harry even at that distance was how well he was doing it; he was going along as though the lake were a floor.

'He's an idiot,' said Malfoy, interested.

The boy got to thirty feet, turned to wave, and his face changed.

Harry saw it all happen. He saw the boy look down. He saw him see what was under his feet, which was four inches of ice with the black of a hundred feet of lake going down beneath it; and whatever

had been holding the boy up stopped at that precise moment. He stopped laughing, began at once to flounder, took two steps at a run, and went through.

There was a crack like a gun and a great deal of screaming.

It was over fast. He went in only to the chest, with the ice holding round him. An enormous sixth-year Hufflepuff lay flat on his stomach, grabbed him by the robes, hauled him out onto his back, and the two of them came off the lake in an undignified sliding tangle to the sound of the entire bank shouting at once. They brought him past Harry a minute later, blue, wrapped in four cloaks, with his teeth going like a telegraph, being carried towards the castle in the general direction of Madam Pomfrey.

'*Why* did you look down?' the sixth-year was saying, to nobody, over and over, with the particular fury of fright. 'You were all right. You were all right the whole way, you daft little idiot. You were fine till you looked down.'

Harry stood watching them go up the lawn. And Malfoy was already gone.

'

*

Hermione, meanwhile, was coming apart.

Harry had been too angry to notice it in January, too ashamed to mention it in February, and by the middle of the month it wasn't possible to miss. Every night of the week she was in the same corner of the common room behind the same barricade: three tables pushed together, Arithmancy charts weighted down with inkpots, two rune dictionaries open at once, a stack of diagrams of Muggles lifting heavy things, and files, files, files of notes in that small fast hand. She didn't talk. If you spoke to her she snapped, then apologised,

then snapped again; and once, going past at eleven at night, Harry saw her asleep sitting up with her quill still in her fingers.

'How's she doing it?' Ron muttered one evening.

Harry was at the next table, grinding through an essay on Undetectable Poisons for Snape. He looked up. Hermione was visible only as a quantity of hair over the top of a tower of books.

'Doing what?'

'Getting to all her classes!' said Ron. 'I heard her this morning, talking to Professor Vector, that Arithmancy witch. They were going on about yesterday's lesson, all the questions she'd asked in it. Harry, she can't've been there. She was with us in Care of Magical Creatures, we were up at the paddock with the fire crabs, she had her eyebrows singed. And Ernie Macmillan reckons she's never missed a Muggle Studies class, not one, when half of them are at the same time as Divination.' He counted it off on his fingers and ran out of fingers. 'And she's never missed one of them either.'

'She must be swapping.'

'You can't swap. There's one of her.'

Harry had three inches of essay left and a Potions lesson in the morning, so the mystery of Hermione's timetable went into the drawer with everything else; two seconds later he was interrupted anyway, by Wood, who arrived at his shoulder looking like a man coming back from a funeral.

'Bad news, Harry. I've just been to see Professor McGonagall about the Firebolt. She... er... got a bit shirty with me. Told me I'd got my priorities wrong. Seemed to think I cared more about winning the Cup than I do about you staying alive. Just because I told her I didn't care if it threw you off, as long as you caught the Snitch first.'

Wood shook his head slowly, a man wronged.

‘Honestly, the way she was yelling at me. You’d think I’d said something terrible. I’ve heard some of the stories in person but to see that terrible, terrible gaze...’

He gave himself a shake, like a dog coming out of the lake.

‘Then I asked her how much longer she was going to keep it.’ He screwed his face up and did Professor McGonagall’s voice, badly, in a register about an octave too high. ‘*As long as necessary, Wood*.’ He unscrewed his face. ‘I reckon it’s time you ordered a new broom, Harry. There’s an order form at the back of *Which Broomstick*. You could get a Nimbus Two Thousand and One, like Malfoy’s got.’

‘I’m not buying anything Malfoy thinks is good,’ said Harry flatly.

Ron looked up from his star chart at that, and looked at Harry for slightly longer than the remark needed.

January went into February without the weather noticing. The ice stayed on the lake, the frost stayed on the inside of the dormitory windows, and the match against Ravenclaw came nearer week by week while Harry went on flying the Shooting Star. He got into the habit of asking Professor McGonagall after every Transfiguration lesson, with Ron hovering at his shoulder, and Hermione going past them both with her face turned away.

On the twelfth occasion, Professor McGonagall answered him before he had opened his mouth.

‘No, Potter, you can’t have it back yet. We’ve checked for most of the usual curses, but Professor Flitwick believes the broom might be carrying a Hurling Hex. I shall tell you once we’ve finished checking it.’ She gathered her papers. ‘Now, please stop badgering me.’

The anti-dementor lessons weren’t going as Harry had hoped either.

Four weeks in, he could get the silver out of his wand every time, which was more than he had expected in January. The trouble was what it did when it got there. It hung. It made a shape about the size of a large dog with no edges to it, a sort of fog with a lamp in it. It stood between him and the thing out of the packing case while Harry's arms shook, while the strength ran out of him like water out of a cracked jug; it never once went forward.

'You're expecting too much of yourself,' said Professor Lupin, in the fourth week, in a voice with iron in it. 'For a thirteen-year-old wizard, even an indistinct Patronus is a huge achievement. You aren't passing out anymore, are you?'

'I thought a Patronus would... charge the dementors down or something,' said Harry dispiritedly. 'Make them disappear-'

'The true Patronus does do that,' said Lupin. 'But you've achieved a great deal in a very short space of time. If the dementors put in an appearance at your next Quidditch match, you will be able to keep them at bay long enough to get back to the ground.'

'You said it's harder if there are loads of them.'

'I have complete confidence in you,' said Lupin, smiling.

Harry said nothing to that. He was angry with himself, and the anger had a dishonest root that he couldn't dig out: he knew why the charm wouldn't go forward. It wouldn't go forward because half of him was still standing in the fog on purpose, with his hand out, waiting for a voice.

*

The second time he nearly asked her was in the library, in the first week of February.

He had gone there to find Hermione, actually, without success; what he found instead, at the far end past the Restricted Section, at a

table with nothing on it but one book and a pair of grey gloves, was Dracina Malfoy. She had plainly been there for some time. She shut the book when she saw him coming, face down, with her hand flat on the cover, which meant it was something she didn't intend him to see the title of.

'Potter. Sit down, you're blocking the light.'

He sat down.

'What are you reading?'

'Nothing of the slightest interest.' She moved the book to her lap. 'Did you want me, or are you merely wandering about looking tragic? You've been doing that all term. It's very fetching, mind, but one does wonder.'

'I've been busy.'

'You've been avoiding me,' said Malfoy. 'For four days in January, then again last week, and you are no good at it whatever. You go the other way round the Charms corridor. There is no reason on earth to go the other way round the Charms corridor, Potter, it adds two minutes, and I have timed it.'

There was a pause. Harry turned a quill over on the table.

This was it, then. She had opened the door herself. He had the sentence ready; he'd been carrying the sentence for six weeks, polished with use. *You told me you didn't send it. There's a letter on Hagrid's table with your father's name on it.*

'Right,' he said. 'Then I'll tell you why. There's something I need to-'

'*I won't,* though! I won't, I won't, I *won't*!'

The voice came from two aisles over, a girl's, very shrill, the kind that carries in a library precisely because its owner is trying to whisper. Madam Pince's head came up behind the desk like a vulture's.

Harry turned round. Two first-year Hufflepuffs had come out from between the shelves, locked in an argument that had clearly been going for a while; the one in front had her sleeve pushed up to the elbow, holding her own forearm out in front of her.

'Look at it, then,' she was saying. 'Go on, Mary, look at it properly. It's gone. There's a mark, there's nothing else, Madam Pomfrey did it in about four seconds, and it was all the way through, I could see the-'

'I'm not saying you're lying,' said the other one stubbornly.

'You are. That's exactly what you're saying.'

'I'm *not*. I'm saying I don't believe a cut goes all the way through somebody's arm on Tuesday and isn't there on Friday. That's not the same as saying you're lying, it's saying I've got to see it to-'

'You're *looking* at it!'

'I want to touch it,' said the second girl.

There was a short, exasperated silence.

'Fine,' said the first girl, and thrust her arm out further. 'Go on, then. Put your finger on it. Right on it, in the middle, where it was. Mind, it's still a bit-'

Harry watched the second girl take her friend's wrist in one hand, quite seriously, like a healer, press two fingers into the thin white line in the middle of the forearm, then leave them there for a long moment; then he watched her face do something complicated, going quiet.

'Oh,' she said. 'I'm sorry, Lizzie. All right. I believe you.'

'You're an awful friend.'

'I know,' said the second girl humbly, still holding her wrist.

They went off between the shelves, arm in arm, with Madam Pince hissing at them from the desk.

'What,' said Dracina Malfoy, 'in the name of Merlin was that?'

‘Hufflepuffs,’ said Harry.

‘They’re like a sort of weather.’ She gathered her gloves, with the book held against her, and stood. ‘You were saying something you needed to do. Need. Needed. Whichever it was.’

Harry opened his mouth.

There was a mark, there was nothing else; she had wanted to put her finger on it before she would have it. And Harry, who had been handed one Ministry letter, who had built six weeks of conviction on top of it, found himself in the position of a boy who has never once asked to touch the thing, yet has been perfectly content to call it proved.

‘Nothing,’ he said. ‘It can wait.’

‘It had better be worth the wait,’ said Malfoy, and she went.

*

The third time was in the Entrance Hall at the beginning of the last week of February, and it was the nearest he came.

She was waiting for him. There was no pretending otherwise; she was standing by the foot of the marble staircase in her cloak with the fur at the collar, in a place where she had no earthly business standing, and when Harry came down with his broom over his shoulder she stepped straight into his path.

‘I’ve been thinking about your match,’ she said. ‘You’ll be on that school broom again, I suppose, the one with the bent handle.’

‘The Shooting Star. Yeah.’

‘It’s an insult,’ said Malfoy, with real feeling. ‘It’s an insult to everybody who has to watch you fly it.’ She turned a glove over in her hands. Then, in an entirely different voice, quick, almost rough, as though getting rid of something: ‘Potter, I’ve got a Nimbus. The Two Thousand and One. I’ve two, in fact, the other’s at home. I want

you to take the spare one for Saturday, and I don't want to be argued with about it.'

Harry stopped.

There was nothing clever in her face at all. That was the extraordinary thing; there was no audience, there was no chin, there was a girl of thirteen standing in a draughty hall holding her own gloves and going slightly pink, having plainly worked out in advance that he would say no.

'Dracina-'

'It isn't charity.'

'I know.'

'It's entirely selfish. I've every intention of beating you in the spring, and I shan't enjoy it if people can say afterwards that you were on a broom out of a shed.' She lifted her chin at last, late, as though remembering it. 'So you'll take it.'

Harry had told Wood flat, a fortnight since, that he wouldn't ride anything with Malfoy money in it if it were the last broom in Scotland. He stood in the Entrance Hall now and understood, with a lurch, that he was about to say yes; that saying yes meant never asking her about the letter, not ever, because you couldn't take a girl's broomstick on the Friday, then accuse her of killing a hippogriff on the Saturday. It was now or it was never.

'No,' he said. 'Listen. Before anything else, I've got to ask you about-'

'OI! GET OFF HIM! GET OFF-'

The shout went up from the other side of the Hall, by the doors to the dungeons, and the whole Entrance Hall turned.

There was a fifth-year Slytherin called Hobday in the middle of a massive scrap, with a first-year held up against the wall by the front of his robes, shouting into his face; and the first-year had both hands

up round his own collar, not fighting, only hanging there, with his feet clear of the floor. Two of Hobday's friends were standing by looking embarrassed.

'-two Sickles!' Hobday was bellowing. 'Two Sickles, you little toerag, you said Thursday, you said Thursday, it's been a *fortnight*-'

'I haven't got it!' The boy's voice came out in a squeak. 'I'll get it off my brother at Easter, I swear, I'll-'

'You'll get it tonight. You'll get it tonight or I'll have your owl off you to sell, and don't think I won't-'

'HOBDAY.'

Professor Flitwick had come out of the Great Hall at a run, which in Professor Flitwick's case was a rapid sort of bustle at knee height, and the effect was like a hornet arriving at a picnic. Hobday dropped the first-year at once. The boy came down in a heap, grabbed his bag, and bolted up the marble staircase past Harry.

'Put him *down*,' said Flitwick, arriving, 'thank you, you have. Over two Sickles. Over two-' He stopped. He drew himself up to his full height, which brought him roughly level with Hobday's elbow, and what came out of him then was audible in every corner of the Hall. 'Mr Hobday. On the eleventh of December you came to me in my office in some distress. You had lost a quantity of your father's money at cards, to a seventh-year, in this castle, which is forbidden. The sum was nine Galleons, you couldn't pay it, and you had a week to find it.'

Hobday had gone the colour of wet parchment.

'Sir-'

'I paid it,' said Professor Flitwick. 'Out of my own pocket. I paid the seventh-year, I told nobody, I did not write to your father, you were not expelled, and I told you at the time that I expected nothing whatsoever in return.' He let that stand in the air for a moment. 'Nine

Galleons. Two Sickles. Mr Hobday, do you know how many Sickles there are in nine Galleons?'

Hobday didn't answer.

'There are a hundred and fifty-three,' said Flitwick. 'My office, eight o'clock. Go away.'

The Hall watched Hobday go. Then it turned back to its own business with the particular hum of a crowd that has been given something to talk about until Friday.

'Well,' said Dracina Malfoy, who had watched the entire thing with her eyebrows up. 'That was *educational*. A hundred and fifty-three. Do you suppose he'd worked that out beforehand, or is he simply like that?' She put her gloves on, one, then the other. 'What were you about to ask me, Potter?'

Harry was looking at the place where Hobday had been standing.

A hundred and fifty-three. A man had been let off everything, in December, by somebody who had taken the loss himself and had asked for nothing; the first thing he had done with the rest of his winter was to pin a child against a wall over two Sickles.

'Potter.'

'Nothing,' said Harry, and heard how thick his own voice had gone. 'I'll take the broom. Thanks.'

Malfoy's whole face changed.

'Oh,' she said. 'Well. Good. I shall have it sent up. Don't thank me, it's strategy,' and she went off towards the dungeons very fast, without quite managing to stop smiling before she got there.

*

The fourth time, he never got a word out at all.

It was two evenings later, and Harry had come down with Ron to go up to the Owlery, where the broom she had promised was

supposed to be waiting. Ron had turned back at the doors for his scarf, under protest, having been told twice that the front steps were not the open grounds. What he met on the way, on the steps outside the oak doors, in a wind that was taking the last of the frost off the lawns, was a Ravenclaw sixth-year lying flat on her stomach on the gravel with a lantern, examining a sheepskin.

Harry stopped, because it wasn't possible to walk past.

'Excuse me,' he said. 'Are you all right?'

'Shh.' The girl didn't look up. She had a notebook open in the gravel beside her. The sheepskin was spread on the flagstones in front of her, and she was touching it with two fingers in a careful grid, muttering numbers. 'Soaked. Absolutely soaked, you could wring it out, and the stone round it is bone dry. Look at that. Look at it.'

Harry looked. It was true. The fleece lay in a dark heavy wet patch; for a foot all round it the flagstones were pale and dry as a hearth.

'Right,' said Harry. 'And that's... good?'

'It's *impossible*,' said the girl happily. 'There's no dew tonight. The glass has been rising since four. There is no reason in the physical world for that fleece to be wet. I have had it out here for two hours, and it is wet.' She wrote something down. 'So now I do it the other way round.'

'The other way round.'

'Tomorrow night.' She sat up on her heels, pushing her hair out of her face, and Harry saw that she was shining with it, much as Hermione shone over a rune. 'Dry fleece, wet stone. Everything else exactly the same, same flags, same hour, same fleece. Because this,' she slapped the notebook, 'this on its own proves nothing at all, does it. Could be a fluke. Could be the stone. Could be me wanting it. If

I'm going to stake anything on it I want it twice, the other way about the second time, and *then*-'

'Then you'll believe it?'

'Then I'll believe it,' said the girl, 'and not before. Anybody who tells you that's faithless has never had to write a thing down.'

She went back to her grid.

Harry went down the steps to stand on the gravel with the wind going through his jumper, and didn't go back in for some time.

Because he hadn't asked for it twice. He hadn't asked for it once. He'd been handed one piece of parchment in a hot cabin with a crying man in it, then had built the whole winter on it; he had never once put the thing to the test, never gone to her to say *tell me again, with the lake behind you, no audience, and let me watch your face while you do it*. He had decided instead, had gone on deciding every day since, had carried the decision about like a stone, and had let it make him cold.

He went up to the Owlery, and the Nimbus was there, roped in brown paper with a note in small spiky handwriting that said nothing except *Mind the left-hand foot-rest, it goes if you kick it. D.*

He sat down on the Owlery floor among the feathers, the pellets, the cold, and read the eleven words of it about nine times.

He resolved, with the particular clarity that came to him about once a term, that he would ask her the next day, properly, straight out, with nobody else in the corridor.

He didn't ask her the next day. He didn't ask her the day after that either.

*

The last anti-dementor lesson before the match was on the Thursday, and it ended early.

Harry got the silver out three times. Three times it hung there, refusing to go forward. After the third attempt Lupin shut the lid, sat down on the edge of Professor Binns's desk, and said that was enough.

'Here,' he said. 'You've earned a drink. Something from the Three Broomsticks. You won't have tried it before-'

He pulled two bottles out of his briefcase and knocked the caps off with his wand.

'Butterbeer!' said Harry, without thinking. 'Yeah, I like that stuff!'

Lupin's eyebrow went up about a quarter of an inch.

'Oh,' said Harry. 'Ron and Hermione brought me some back from Hogsmeade.'

'I see,' said Lupin, in the voice of a man filing something, and handed the bottle over anyway.

They drank in silence for a while. The classroom was warmer with the lamps going and the lid shut. Harry sat on a desk with his heels swinging, turning over a question that had been in his head since the first lesson.

'Sir. What's under a dementor's hood?'

Lupin lowered his bottle.

'Hmmm. Well. The only people who really know are in no condition to tell us.' He turned the bottle round in his hands. 'Or they'd never come anywhere near *here*.'

The last word came out torn, down in the chest, like how *reeks* had come out over a smoking goblet in October; and Harry, who was getting used to it without in the least understanding it, let it go by.

'You see,' Lupin went on, mildly, 'the dementor lowers its hood only to use its last and worst weapon.'

'What's that?'

‘They call it the Dementor’s Kiss.’ Lupin’s mouth did something that wasn’t quite a smile. ‘It’s what dementors do to those they wish to destroy utterly. To consume all that is good. There is a mouth under there, Harry, which is what the hood is for; they clamp their jaws upon the mouth of the victim, and they suck out his soul.’

Harry had a mouthful of butterbeer at the time, and most of it went down his front.

‘What... they kill-?’

‘Oh, no.’ Lupin shook his head. ‘Much worse than that. You can exist without your soul, you know, as long as your brain and your heart are still working. But the place of it has to be filled by something, and what fills it is never yours: a beast of the sort a vampire carries, or one or two other things I shan’t describe. Without even that you’ll have no sense of self any more. No memory. No... anything.’ He set the bottle down. ‘There’s no chance at all of recovery. You’ll just exist. An empty shell. And the soul is gone, Harry. Not sleeping. Not waiting somewhere to be fetched. *Gone*..’

Harry sat looking at the bottle in his hands.

‘Why would it not be given back?’

‘Because the thing has eaten it,’ said Lupin. ‘Ask me a happier question.’

Then he picked the bottle up again, drank a little, and said, in a voice gone quite flat:

‘It’s the fate that awaits Sirius Black. It was in the Daily Prophet this morning. The Ministry have given the dementors permission to perform it if they find him.’

The classroom was very quiet.

Harry sat for a moment with the whole of it in front of him: a mouth under a hood, a man held still, the thing that was him going out of him forever while his body went on sitting in a chair. It was

the most horrible thing he had ever been told. He discovered that he wasn't horrified.

He was pleased.

'He deserves it,' he said suddenly.

'You think so?' said Lupin lightly.

'Yes.'

'Do you really think anyone deserves that?'

'Yes,' said Harry defiantly. 'For... for some things...'

He could have told him. It was all right there: the Christmas tree, the pine needles, Fudge's rumble, *best man*, *godfather*, *they made him Secret-Keeper*. He could have put the whole of it on the desk between them. Some part of him wanted to very badly, because he had told nobody but Ron and Hermione, whereas Lupin had known them. But telling it meant saying how he had come to hear it, and how he had come to hear it was a tunnel out of the castle he wasn't supposed to have been in, with a map he wasn't supposed to have, in a village he had no signed form for. Lupin wouldn't be impressed.

So he finished his butterbeer, said thank you, and went to the door.

'Harry.'

He turned.

Lupin was still sitting on the edge of the desk with the empty bottle in both hands, looking at the floor, and when he spoke he did it slowly, picking the words up one at a time like a man handling something hot.

'Despite how hurt you may feel. No one is above forgiveness. Nor redemption. So long as they seek it earnestly.' He looked up. 'And denying someone their final judgement, no matter their crime, is one of the foulest crimes one can commit. It's the sort of thing that

draws attention from... well. Some very nasty people. Please keep that in mind.'

Harry nodded, because there was nothing else to do with it, and went out.

He got about forty feet along the corridor before he understood that he had no idea what the second half of that had meant, and about sixty before he decided he didn't want to.

He half wished he had never asked about the hood. The answer went round with him up two flights of stairs, and he was so deep in the business of imagining it, of working out what it would feel like to have the thing that was you drawn out through your own mouth, that he walked straight into Professor McGonagall on the fourth-floor landing.

'Do watch where you're going, Potter!'

'Sorry, Professor-'

'I've just been looking for you in the Gryffindor common room.' She had something long and thin held upright in her right hand, wrapped in nothing at all. 'Well, here it is. We've done everything we could think of, and there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with it at all. You've got a very good friend somewhere, Potter.'

Harry's mouth opened.

She was holding out the Firebolt. It was exactly as it had been on Christmas morning, down to the shine on the handle; whatever Madam Hooch and Professor Flitwick had done to it, they had put every twig of it back.

'I can have it back?' said Harry weakly. 'Seriously?'

'Seriously,' said Professor McGonagall, and she was smiling, actually smiling, which Harry had seen perhaps four times in three years. 'I daresay you'll need to get the feel of it before Saturday's match, won't you? And Potter. Do try and win, won't you? Or we'll

be out of the running for the eighth year in a row, as Professor Snape was kind enough to remind me only last night.'

Harry took the broom.

Then, without anything resembling a decision, he put both arms round Professor McGonagall and hugged her.

He let go again almost at once, appalled, with his ears on fire, saying something that was meant to be thank you; then he was off up the stairs with the Firebolt over his shoulder before the worst of it caught up with him, so he didn't look back.

Which was a pity, because Professor McGonagall stood on the fourth-floor landing for a good while after he had gone, with her hands folded in front of her and her spectacles in one of them.

She had read the file. She had read it in 1981, in a street in Surrey, sitting on a garden wall as a cat for the better part of a day watching a family through a bay window. She had said what she thought about that family to Albus Dumbledore on that pavement at midnight, and had been overruled; she had gone on reading it, one line at a time, for eleven years. The bars on a window. A boy who said thank you for a broomstick as though it were an administrative error. A boy who had not once, in two and a half years, asked her for anything at all.

'Yes,' she said, to the empty landing. She put her spectacles back on, then went down to tell the Headmaster that the broom had been returned, that she'd been quite right about it, and that she would be obliged if he wouldn't say so.

Harry stopped on the fifth floor, though, with the Firebolt in his hand, because there was a thing to be done first that he had no appetite for at all.

The Nimbus was still under his bed in its brown paper. He fetched it down to the Owlery before dinner, wrote three drafts of a

note on the back of a Potions diagram, burnt two of them, then sent the fourth with a school owl: *Got my own back off McGonagall, so you'd better have this one. Thanks anyway. It was decent of you. H.*

He stood in the Owlery doorway afterwards and had to admit, with the wind coming off the lake through the arrow slits, that *it was decent of you* had been the easiest line to write, that he had spent twenty minutes avoiding a different sentence altogether; also that every day he didn't ask her, the asking got heavier, as an unopened letter gets heavier on a mantelpiece.

Harry met Ron coming the other way at the top of the stairs, grinning so hard it looked painful.

'She gave it to you? *Excellent!* Listen, can I still have a go on it? Tomorrow?'

'Yeah. Anything.' Harry's heart was going like a bird's. 'You know what, we should make up with Hermione. She was only trying to help.'

'I know,' said Ron. 'I've been trying since Boxing Day, mate. So've you. You can't get at her. She's behind about four feet of library and she bites.'

'Then we'll go through the library.'

'You can't talk to her, Harry, I've had a go four times-'

'So we have another go,' said Harry, and he heard the thing come into his own voice that came into it occasionally, the thing that had got him down a pipe in June with a sword he had no business holding. 'She's our friend, she's about a stone lighter than she was at Christmas, and she's going to work herself to death in a corner on her own if somebody doesn't make her stop. I don't care if she bites.'

Ron looked at him for a second.

'Right,' he said. 'Well. I'll hold her books and you can do the talking.'

‘You hold the cat,’ said Harry. ‘I’m not going near the cat. If that thing gets hold of me I’ll come down the stairs like Hobday.’

Ron laughed so loudly that a portrait told him to be quiet.

‘See, that’s what you’re like,’ he said, as they went along the corridor. ‘You come out with that stuff in the middle of everything. Fred reckons you’re the funniest bloke in this school and nobody’s noticed because they’re all too busy looking at your forehead.’ He shook his head. ‘All right. We’ll do it tonight. Both of us.’

They turned into the corridor to the Tower, and found Neville Longbottom in front of Sir Cadogan’s portrait, close to tears, with Sir Cadogan leaning out of the frame on his sword.

‘I wrote them down!’ Neville was saying. ‘But I must’ve dropped them somewhere!’

‘A likely tale!’ roared Sir Cadogan. Then he caught sight of Harry and Ron, brightening enormously. ‘Good even, my fine young yeomen! Come clap this loon in irons. He is trying to force entry to the chambers within!’

‘Oh, shut up,’ said Ron, as the two of them drew level.

‘I’ve lost the passwords!’ Neville told them miserably. ‘I made him tell me what passwords he was going to use this week, because he keeps changing them, and now I don’t know what I’ve done with them!’

‘Oddsbodikins,’ said Harry to Sir Cadogan.

Sir Cadogan looked bitterly disappointed, and swung forward with extreme reluctance, like a man opening a door to the tax collector.

The common room went off like a firework.

‘Where’d you get it, Harry?’

‘Will you let me have a go?’

‘Have you ridden it yet, Harry?’

‘Ravenclaw’ll have no chance, they’re all on Cleansweep Sevens!’

‘Can I just *hold* it, Harry?’

For ten minutes the Firebolt went round the room, held at arm’s length by one person after another, sighted along, breathed on, handed to the next; Harry stood in the middle of it answering the same four questions, which was so entirely unlike anything that had happened to him before Hogwarts that he thought, briefly, of Dudley’s birthday parties, then stopped thinking about them.

At last the crowd thinned out, and through the gap Harry saw the corner.

Hermione hadn’t come over. She was the only person in Gryffindor Tower who hadn’t come over; she was bent at her barricade with her head down, working, with a quill in her hand that wasn’t moving.

Harry picked up the Firebolt. He and Ron went across.

She looked up when they got there.

‘I got it back,’ said Harry, grinning, holding it where she could see it.

‘See, Hermione? There wasn’t anything wrong with it!’ said Ron.

‘Well... there might have been!’ said Hermione. ‘I mean, at least you know now that it’s safe!’

‘Yeah, I suppose so,’ said Harry. It cost him nothing at all, in the event, which surprised him; he’d been carrying the quarrel for ten weeks, then it simply went, like a coat he had put down. ‘I’d better put it upstairs-’

‘I’ll take it!’ said Ron eagerly. ‘I’ve got to give Scabbers his rat tonic.’

He took the Firebolt in both hands, holding it as men carry things made of glass, and went off up the boys' staircase with it.

'Can I sit down, then?' Harry asked Hermione.

'I suppose so,' said Hermione, and moved an immense stack of parchment off the chair beside her.

Harry sat. He looked round at the table, which was worse close up than it had been from across the room: an Arithmancy essay with the ink still wet on it, a longer one for Muggle Studies with the title *Explain Why Muggles Need Electricity* underlined twice, a rune translation under Hermione's left elbow with three different dictionaries holding its corners down.

'How are you getting through all this stuff?' he asked her.

'Oh, well... you know... working hard,' said Hermione.

Close to, she looked nearly as ill as Lupin. There were shadows under her eyes the colour of a bruise, her hair had given up entirely, and her hand, when she put the quill down, had an ink callus on it that Harry had never seen on anybody.

'Why don't you just drop a couple of subjects?' he said, watching her shift three books to get at a fourth.

'I couldn't *do* that!' said Hermione, looking scandalised.

'Arithmancy looks terrible.' Harry picked up a chart covered in columns of numbers with lines ruled between them in four colours.

'Oh no, it's *wonderful*!' said Hermione earnestly. 'It's my favourite subject! It's-'

Harry never found out what was wonderful about Arithmancy.

A strangled yell came down the boys' staircase.

The entire common room stopped. Fifty heads came round at once and fixed on the entrance to the stairs; nobody moved; for about three seconds the only sound in Gryffindor Tower was the fire. Then

feet, coming down fast, louder, louder, and Ron came round the last turn of the spiral at a run, dragging a bedsheet behind him.

'LOOK!' he bellowed, crossing the room to Hermione's table. 'LOOK!'

He shook the sheet in her face.

'Ron, what-?'

'SCABBERS! LOOK! SCABBERS!'

Hermione had leant back from him as far as her chair allowed, with her hands up, utterly bewildered. Harry looked at the sheet.

There was something on it. It wasn't much, a smear with two or three spots near the hem. It was red, and it was the exact colour that makes a room go cold.

'BLOOD!' Ron yelled into the silence. 'HE'S GONE! AND YOU KNOW WHAT WAS ON THE FLOOR?'

'N-no,' said Hermione, in a very small voice.

Ron threw something down onto her rune translation.

Harry and Hermione both leant forward together. Lying across the weird spiky shapes of the runes, bright against the parchment, were several long ginger hairs.

Nobody said anything.

Then Hermione made a noise like a hiccup. Her whole face came apart; she turned sideways, put her head against Harry's shoulder, began to cry in great shuddering gulps, saying the same thing over and over into his robes: that she was sorry, that she was so sorry, that she had kept him out, that she had told him his broom would kill him, that she had never meant it, any of it, she was *sorry*.

Harry put one arm round her, awkwardly, the way she had done for him on the hearthrug in December, and held on.

And over the top of her head he looked at Ron.

Ron was standing absolutely still on the other side of the table with the sheet hanging from one fist, white to the lips, saying nothing at all. Harry watched him get his mouth open to start, caught his eye, didn't shake his head, didn't speak, didn't do anything a person watching could have described.

Ron stopped.

He stood there for a long moment with his jaw working. Then he dropped the sheet on the floor, turned round, went back up the staircase; the only thing he said, to nobody, on the way up, was that he was going to find his rat.